

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE BOILER AND THE WHISTLE.

EMOTIONAL fiction is something for the writer of average capabilities to avoid. Most of us fall into the way of sickly sentimentalism, or of melodrama, when trying to depict emotional scenes.

The only secret that can be imparted for the effective handling of emotion is *repression*. Emotion is a force, and like other forces it is powerful only when concentrated. Steam possesses tremendous power, but only when produced under pressure. Compressed air will move tons; but in its untrammelled state it is hardly thought of as a force. To take advantage of the vast potential power of a river we dam it, or confine it for its powerful use in hydraulics. Electricity, too, must be forced through a resisting medium in order to produce heat, light or power. A gunpowder explosion may hurl projectiles at inconceivable speed, but only when the explosive is confined in a small chamber.

Likewise emotion may be either aimlessly dissipated or confined and repressed until it becomes a driving, awe-inspiring, even dangerous power. One man will vent his anger in harmless sputtering, ranting, and frothing at the mouth; but beyond making a nuisance of himself he accomplishes little. Another man, equally provoked, will say nothing, do nothing, will scarcely change countenance, except, perhaps, for a dangerous glint in his eyes. This man is to be feared. His anger, being repressed, is a power that, when finally released, may kill.

Deep emotion can not be expressed, because as soon as it finds expression it loses its depth. People who cry easily, who gush over their friends, become wildly excited in emergencies, spout vindictiveness when they are irritated, dance and shout when they are pleased—such people probably do not feel very deeply. They are like engines that blow off so much steam through the safety valve that they never develop much power. They recall Abraham Lincoln's story of the little river steamboat which had a whistle so large

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in proportion to its boiler that every time it was blown the engine stopped.

The grief that can find no relief in tears, the love that is too reverent to express itself in caresses, the joy or anger that renders one speechless—these are the emotions that drive.

All this has its lesson for the fiction writer.

The tendency of the novice in handling an emotional passage is to "lay it on too thick." If his hero meets with a bereavement, he is pictured as moaning, tearing his hair and giving way to wild lamentations limited only by the extent of the author's imagination and vocabulary. If the same hero loves, he goes into sickly sentimental rhapsodies over the object of his devotion; the author fears lest the reader may not appreciate the intensity of his passion and so makes him maudlin. If the character is moved to pity, nothing less than crocodile tears will serve to express his feeling.

After reading such a passage, the author sometimes feels vaguely that the emotion is not altogether impressive. In an effort to make it so, he goes back over it and substitutes stronger adjectives, adds a few more heartbreaking sobs to the hero's grief, a few more sighs to his love scene, a few more quavers to his ejaculations of pity, and then he wonders why the editors fail to recognize a masterpiece.

The American ideal is sturdiness. Our people are far enough advanced in real culture to recognize that feeling is nowise to be measured by its outward expression. The grief that we most respect is silent grief, the love that impresses us is that which is felt rather than talked about, the pity that convinces us of its sincerity is without ostentation. In a word, whether in real life or in fiction, the character whose manner under strong emotion is most repressed convinces us most of the real depth of his feeling.

Realizing this, the intuitive writer may permit his weak characters to rant and sentimentalize; but his strong characters will be self-contained. The child cries when hurt or grieved; the man tightens his lips. The untutored maid loudly bewails when calamity befalls her; in like misfortune the cultured woman whom she serves finds little expression beyond silent weeping. The weakling grovels and begs for mercy when his enemies get the better of him; the strong man shrugs his shoulders and meets torture and death with no outward tremor. Does this mean that the more developed type of humanity is less capable of feeling? Hardly. It would be as logical to say that a mighty turbine engine is less forceful than a teakettle, because it fails to spout steam under the same pressure.

Of course, the above illustrations will not always hold true.

The maid may bear her grief silently, while the mistress gives way to lamentation; this only proves that in such instance the maid is the stronger of the two. There are self-contained children and sniveling men. Which, obviously, does not in the least affect the force of the argument.

Since deep emotion can not be expressed without being cheapened, the writer frequently finds it a difficult phase of life to depict. The law of suggestion is here very potent. Make the reader feel that the character is exercising repression, then the repressed emotion will also be felt. Suppose we illustrate this by parallel passages.

EXAMPLE ONE.

The scene is a typical business office; the president of the concern, a strong-featured man of affairs, is standing by his desk dictating to his stenographer. "I want to get everything out of the way," he observes, "so that I can go to the station to meet my wife." His eyes rest for a moment on a framed photograph that stands on his desk, then he turns his back on it and resumes his dictation. While he is in the midst of a letter, the office boy brings him a telegram. He tears it open and pauses in his dictation to read it. For a moment he stares at the sheet of paper, then: "Where were we?"—turning to the stenographer. "Yes, I remember. (Dictates.) "If our claims appeal to you, we stand ready to send a representative who will quote prices." Then, in a strained tone of voice: "That is all for today—you may go." Again he reads the telegram, then allows it to flutter from his fingers. In a daze, he walks slowly toward the door—pauses where his hat and coat hang on the rack, mechanically takes them down, and passes out, looking straight ahead. The stenographer picks up the telegram, reads it, then gazes after him with an expression of pity. The telegram announces that his wife is dead, the victim of a train wreck.

EXAMPLE TWO.

The same scene—a typical business office; the president is dictating to his stenographer. "I want to get my desk clear," he explains, "so that I can go to the station to meet my wife. Ah, how I have missed her—how I long to see her sweet face again!" He goes on with his dictation. While he is in the midst of a letter, the office boy brings him a telegram. He seizes it feverishly, and tears it open. A look of bewilderment comes into his eyes, followed by one of wild despair. "My God!" he exclaims, dropping the telegram and raising both hands to his head. "She is dead! Dead! It can't be true—there is some mistake!" Again he searches for the telegram, finds it and reads. "No—there is no mistake. My little one—my adored one—killed in a train wreck—how can I bear it!" To the stenographer: "Leave me—leave me to my grief! No—I must go to her. My coat—my hat!" And so he rushes forth.

Which do you feel most sorry for? The man who bore his grief silently, or the one who gave vent to it in frenzied language? Ten to one the husband in the second example will be married again within a year!

If rightly pictured, such a scene as the first does not indicate callousness. The fact that the man did not give way to outward expression of grief shows two things—first, that he is strong, and second that the shock and grief are too terrible for expression. Why does he finish dictating his letter after receiving the telegram? Because it furnishes a sort of shock absorber. Often, when one receives sudden news, whether very good or very bad, or perhaps

when one has a sudden sharp twinge of pain, he mechanically attends to some duty near at hand before *daring* to realize his sensation to the full. I recall witnessing, last summer, an exhibition of the national game in which a batted ball struck the pitcher in the groin. He picked up the ball, accurately threw the runner out at first, then collapsed. Had there been no immediate duty to take his mind from the pain, he probably would have collapsed instantly. Photoplay-wrights, who are wholly dependent on action to produce results, might well take note of this illustration.

Sometimes repression may take the form of a light or whimsical statement of a serious matter. Which of these two statements is the more impressive?

EXAMPLE ONE.

I looked up to find myself staring into the horrible black depths of a revolver barrel. The man who held it was evidently bent upon having my life. His ferocious glance was turned loweringly upon me. My blood ran cold at the realization of my predicament.

EXAMPLE TWO.

I looked up and found myself facing the business end of a revolver. The discovery was not exactly pleasant. I should have liked to request the man who held it to point the gun some other way, for fear it might accidentally go off. But a glance at his unsympathetic countenance convinced me that he was a grouchy individual who would probably resent the suggestion.

Most people will certainly find the second example more convincing, in spite of the fact that it is—or rather because it is—an *understatement* of the situation.

Repression may take the form of altogether omitting an impassioned scene. Unless you are a master hand at making love scenes interesting, you will contrive to skip them. Let Alonzo find his adored one waiting for him in the summerhouse under the starlight, perhaps give his first word of greeting; then skip to the time when they emerge from the summerhouse and stroll up the path, walking apart—oh, very far apart—under the curious eyes of the family and the neighbors. Repression again: the farther apart they walk on the path, the nearer together they have been in the summerhouse. And the reader's imagination has undoubtedly pictured a more idyllic bit of love-making than any writer short of Robert W. Chambers could (or would) describe in detail.

The final syllable of repression phonetically suggests the word "shun." The more details you shun in picturing an emotional scene, the more the reader will supply, provided you carefully furnish the right suggestions.

In picturing emotion, the simple, unaffected statements are of most account. But occasionally, it is true, a tremendous effect may be produced by letting a self-contained character "cut loose" in the story. When a man who seldom loses his poise explodes in wrath

or displays some other pronounced emotion, we know that the provocation must be extreme. Such an event is worth saving for the climax of your production.

HACKNEYED PLOTS.

ALMOST any plot or situation can be "put over," if the author possesses sufficient skill; but a number have become so hackneyed through repeated use that for practical purposes they may be spoken of as unsalable. An old plot with "modern trimmings," is a dependable commodity in the market—but some are so old that it is mighty hard to attach the trimmings.

Apparently the only sure way for an aspiring author to progress beyond all the possible hackneyed stories is to write them and thus "get them out of his system." It seems necessary for every writer to try his hand once at each of the following "standbys":

The "rube" story. Farmer Hayseed comes to the city and falls into the toils of a gang of swindlers, who endeavor to secure his "roll." But in spite of his innocence, Farmer H. is a wise old duck, and neatly "skins the skinnners."

The salted mine story. A tenderfoot buys a mine that has been given a fictitious value by an unscrupulous promoter. But the tenderfoot turns the tables, either by discovering an actual vein of rich ore in the mine or making the promoter believe that he has done so and selling it back at an advanced rate.

The racehorse story—now frequently transposed to an automobile, motorcycle, aeroplane, or other setting. A stranger with a jaded, apparently ambitionless "nag" comes into a community and manages to be drawn into a horse race. He surprises everybody by winning the race and departing with all the wagered money in sight. It is afterward discovered that the horse was a famous trotter in disguise—a ringer.

"The Heroism of a Coward." I must put this in quotation marks, because it is the title of one of the first stories I ever sold. The acceptance must have been an accident, for the tale of a man who has shown what seems to be a yellow streak, but who eventually redeems himself by a supreme act of heroism has been done to death. It is especially popular in these "parlous" times of war.

The dream story. A character contemplating an unworthy course of action falls asleep and dreams that he carries it out to a horrifying conclusion. He wakes in the throes of remorse, to find that he still has a chance to select the better course.

The intercepted letter. Stories based on a misunderstanding between lovers, owing to the failure of a letter to reach its destina-

tion (the "villyane" usually sees to this part) have actually been known to attain great popularity. This was long the favorite device for keeping the lovers in despair and the reader in suspense—but the good old days are passing.

The jealous husband or lover, who sees his wife or sweetheart kiss another man and seeks revenge—only to discover that the other man is the woman's brother, or at least some close relative—is another old favorite. It has all the essentials of suspense and a surprise ending; but it became obsolete through repetition before most present-day literary aspirants saw the light.

This by no means exhausts the list of plots and situations that have served their day, though it may be said to skim the cream. The surest way for a young author to fortify himself against them is to get his versions down on paper. Like measles, they are seemingly a necessary annoyance—it is better to have them over with while one is young and needs the practice.

But how are we to know the hackneyed stories when we see them—by reading all the fiction that ever has been published?

That, of course, would be an impossible task. Nor should the writer be under the necessity of reading the prototypes of a story to know whether or not it is hackneyed. The test of the matter is not, "Have I read any other narratives based on this idea?" but, "Is it likely that many others have thought of this?"

If, for example, we turn to the battlefield, where the test of a man is chiefly his courage, what more natural than that the fiction-bent mind should hit upon the idea of a soldier who acquires a reputation for cowardice, but eventually proves himself the bravest of the brave? The intuitive writer would discard this plot because it seems likely to have been many times thought of before.

Let the student who feels that all the possible stories have been written take hope. An infinity of stories remain to be written. In order to discover them, the writer should be equipped with a type of mind similar to that of the pioneer or the inventor. Those who take up literature possess this type of mind—it is the force that urges them to express themselves through the medium of words. That our efforts to produce something new are often ineffective is no evidence that the inventive, the pioneer faculty is lacking. It may mean that we have not yet developed the strength necessary to force a way into the uncharted region—and strength will be developed by persistence.

Dear Mr. Hawkins: The criticism of my stories came this morning and I want to thank you very much for your suggestions and kindly interest. I think that your letter will be more valuable to me than all of my course with the * * * and I am planning eagerly for the spare time in which to rewrite the manuscripts in accordance with the ideas you have so generously given me.—A. C. C.

STILL PLAYING THE "GAME".

The brief versified "symposium" entitled "A Game of Chance" in the October Student-Writer has inspired others to relate their (alleged) experiences in like fashion. That all sides of the question may be given full expression, we publish these two additional contributions:

I too had a "hunch" that wealth and fame
Would flow my way in the writing game.
I quit my job and commenced to write,
And pounded the keys with main and might.
In course of time my story was done
And I mailed it away to the lucky one.
But the offer he made damped my elation—
"Ten lines for a cent, on publication."

BEN H. PELTON.

This modest symposium interests me,
For I've been in all situations, you see;
Sometimes my effusions have brought me returns—
Returns sometimes brought my effusions. One learns,
When rhymes are rejected, to hunt for the cause;
So, knowing the Doctor who'll show me the flaws,
I send mine to Hawkins, for him to reverse,
And soon have some magazine's "dough" in my purse.

S. WEGG, JR.

THE STUDENT-WRITER IN BOOK FORM.

Many have written that they hope the articles in The Student-Writer may appear in more permanent form. This is a typical extract from such a letter: "By the way, I do wish—for the benefit of persons like myself—that you would have your little magazine printed in book form. Every time one arrived I was compelled to sit down and re-write all my stories; for they always contained the fault on which you lectured. Now you see, if I could have taken the medicine in one dose it would have saved time, and needless to say, many a despairing sigh."

In response to what seems to be a "call" it has been decided to issue the articles in the first twelve numbers of The Student-Writer in book form. The volume will be ready soon after the December issue of the magazine is off the press. It will be attractively printed on good paper and with strong, handsome binding, and will be volume one of a writer's library which we hope may grow into a shelfload.

The price of "Helps for the Student Writer" will be \$1.00 a copy; to those who order before December 1, a special rate of 75 cents will be made. Better order at once, before you neglect it.

DOES YOUR SUBSCRIPTION EXPIRE DURING 1917?

Remember that the subscription rate of The Student Writer—new or renewal—is 25 cents a year until January 1, 1917; after that it will be 50 cents a year. And you may now subscribe at the 25 cents rate for four years in advance, beginning with any desired number.

Willard E. Hawkins,

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of THE STUDENT-WRITER, published monthly at Denver, Colo., for October, 1916.

State of Colorado, City and County of Denver, ss.

Before me, a notary in and for the state and county aforesaid, personally appeared Willard E. Hawkins, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of The Student-Writer, Denver, Colo., and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management and circulation, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are:

Publisher, Willard E. Hawkins, 1835 Champa street, Denver, Colo.; Editor, Willard E. Hawkins, 1835 Champa street, Denver, Colo.; Managing Editor, none; Manager, none.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

WILLARD E. HAWKINS,
Signature of Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 2nd day of October, 1916.

WM. SANDERSON.

My commission expires Oct. 13, 1919.

Workshop of THE STUDENT-WRITER, 1835 Champa Street,
Denver, Colorado